

invisible libraries



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Invisible Libraries

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Yin Tu

Reading, the Archivist of Zhou observed, being a matter of bringing to bear upon a length of text the mood of a few hours, the notions and attitudes of a particular juncture of life, is a radically incomplete affair: none of us has ever scratched the surface of a book, for if we happened to read it in a certain wood-raftered room in Baghmara one evening when we were twenty-three, we have glimpsed nothing of what it would show itself to be on a morning in the Karkonosze, or in the shadow of a church in Veliki Preslav, or to a nineteen-year-old girl from Yellowknife, or to a man grown old at the margins of his own dreams in a township in Khakassia that has not yet come into being.

It is said that before he rode away through the Western Gate, the Archivist of Zhou composed a book of five thousand ideograms from each of which a universe unscrolled, with its rivers and generations of leaves, its stars and civilizations, the eyes of its animals gleaming in the dusk, its modes of music, its safeguards and spoliations, its vast attendant weather. And it is said that this book may be found, by those who seek it, in the Library at Yin Tu, far beyond the Western Gate, where one will be given an infinite number of lifetimes, circumstances, bodies, and histories in which to read it, and perhaps, in the end, to understand one or two figures on a page.



Tlon

On arriving at the library of Tlon you must seal your ears with wax. The entrance to the library is blocked by piles of corpses lolling against the walls. Empty zinc shelves are lined up next to each other from wall to wall and go as high as the ceiling.

The cold wind that blows through the empty shelves is said to be possessed by the song of the sirens, escaped from a famous book that was once stored there. If the wind licks your ears you stay beached in the outer rooms of the library and perish of fatal lethargy. But if you survive and reach the inner sanctum, say in search of a volume of Aristotle's *On Comedy*, you find that the library of Tlon possesses a single book: a leather-bound copy of the Mahabharata.

The book rests on a dais in the inner sanctum. You open it and start reading, only to find that the end of the 'Adi Parva' marks the beginning of Aristotle's *On Comedy*. You see that this leather-bound volume of the Mahabharata, hidden away in the inner sanctum of the library, guarded by an aerial siren song, contains all books that ever existed. So that the claim that the Mahabharata makes for itself is also true for the library of Tlon:

What is found here may be found elsewhere.

What is not found here will not be found anywhere.



The Library of Abandoned Children in Burdwan

Having successfully foiled all hopes that his family may have had of him continuing their grand lineage, the Diwan of Burdwan pondered about what he would do with the wealth that he had inherited. His inheritance did not stop the rumours about his less than moral proclivities for old books and young men.

From an early age the Diwan brought together his outsider status to bear on his two abiding passions and cultivated a taste for unnatural couplings in his library. The society of his time was not ready to accept the outcomes of these amorous associations and so he set about the task of converting his old haveli into a library of illegitimate literary offspring.

His first-born was a moody but loyal love child born one accidental evening when he carelessly left his copy of Jane Eyre between Hamlet and Othello. The moor of Venice, still plagued by the guilt of Desdemona's death at his hands, paid little attention to the attractive if staid Ms. Eyre. Hamlet, on the other hand, with his long training in the deeper recesses of the human psyche, recognized immediately a passionate spirit hiding behind the deceptive bonnet and 'twas a consummation devoutly to be wished. The Diwan personally ensured a successful

delivery playing *il miglior fabrio* and quickly realized that there were many like him out there – mixing and matching their books and disrupting the natural classification of the Dewey decimal system as much as they disrespected the imposed order of erotic desire.

The transformation of the haveli took two years and the Diwan spent much of his wealth on importing custom made bookshelves from Chippendale. The child stayed alone for a while, which suited him fine since brooding was his genetic gift, but as word spread about the existence of the library, more books were brought here in the cover of night. A philosopher travelled all the way from Dresden carrying with him all the little pamphlets attributed to Marx's tryst with Emily Dickinson. An outrageously intelligent child who spoke in staccato speech and composed verses after Cummings, she was, in the memorable words of the philosopher – the inevitable end of capitalization.

The library of Burdwan – once the ornate dance hall which hosted many mehfil – now reverberates with the sound of pocket-sized books, monographs and haikus whose existence testifies to the transgressive desires of our lives.



The Memorial Library of Chemin-des-Dames

The Memorial Library of Chemin-des-Dames is a system of tunnels and open trenches, caves and rough catacombs. The bookcases are set into crumbling walls of black earth, and every precaution is taken that no book be protected from the gropings of the autumn damp, the winter cold, the scorching summer heat, or the brainsick exactions of spring.

An arrangement with the local mortuaries ensures that a seeker of books is likelier to find the heads of corpses grinning fixedly at him from the makeshift shelves; reaching out for a volume, his hand will probably accost a hand covered in withered skin the texture of parchment. To add to the patron's discomfort, a regiment of artillery, specially trained in the use of obsolete machines of war, keeps up constant shelling of the library's purlieus.

Reading, in the Memorial Library of Chemin-des-Dames, involves a constant negotiation with the presence of death: not death distilled into literary abstraction, but death in its vehement physical particularity, death as dead people, as rotted bellies and swollen tongues, maggoty fingers and curdled eyeballs.

For those grown bloodless in the business of books who

believe that humankind cannot bear too much reality, the Memorial Library of Chemin-des-Dames holds out a challenge and a hope, for it is consecrated to the view that death vouchsafes us all we can hope to know of the real; that in so parlous an affair as getting through the day, we had best keep our heads below the line, thumbing whatever hymnals we find so that we may stave off for a while the ghosts we deserve to be haunted by; that books, too, are compact with the ooze and reeks of history; that there will always be more filth in the world than there is order, more corpses than there are books; that all reading is reading during wartime.



The National Library of Prospero

Around the time Prospero cemented its position as the foremost nation-state, its scientists and policy makers were huddled deep in discussion. With the demands that were being made on the time of its citizens, it was quite imperative that every act of theirs meet the requirements of expedience. When it came to the act of reading, it seemed particularly important that the people of Prospero be able to synthesize 'useful' information as quickly as possible. As to the question of what a number of politicians derisively referred to as 'reading for pleasure', it was again agreed that the only way to minimize the wastage from this trifling distraction was to combine it with whatever technique was to be developed for knowledge dissemination.

And thus it was that the National Library of Prospero was born.

The physical dimensions of the library itself are unremarkable. A larger than average room in the Central Arcadium hosts a mainframe that virtualizes all the books constituting the library. It is in the manner of acquisition that the government of Prospero considers its coup d'etat.

Every individual in the country is implanted with a chip that sits in their mind: a minute wafer of titanium

electrodes that creates a connection between the individual and the digital mainframe. A person need only think of a book to have the library identify and enqueue it in its database. Any number of books can be lined up for transfer over the course of a day. Finally, at night, as Propsero sleeps, all the books requested for the day are broadcast into the minds of its citizens. They awake the following morning with the entire content of the books encoded into their consciousness.

The system was a spectacular success – at least, at first.

As expected, efficiency rose dramatically as individuals processed vast quantities of information in the course of a few short hours. An immensely well-read citizenry emerged, well-versed in diverse traditions of thought and literature. With the works of other writers inviting an unforeseen empathy in the citizenry, the crime rate dropped dramatically. Of course there were a number of conspiracy theorists who argued that not everything broadcast hypnopaedically was based on the individual's choice.

These dissenters eventually fell silent, but also failed to perceive the true signs of rot. As every piece of information became available to them without any effort, inventions stopped, there were no moments of epiphany or surprise.

Complacency set in where innovation had once thrived.



Memorious

You have to walk for seven days through the sterile streets of Funes before you reach the library of Memorious. The air is glutted with the smell of burnt paper and the sound of televisions blaring.

As you turn the corner at what appears to be the site of the biggest book burning in Funes, you see a smoke-blackened town square strewn with half burnt bookshelves and catalogues. And you stop. You hear them before you see them.

The sluggish hiss of voices wafts towards you like a rumour. You try to follow their source and see, bleary-eyed men and women queued up on the gravelly ground like bookshelves in a library. They're whispering frantically to children and young lovers passing by and those who stop to listen keep coming back for more. Every once in a while in the middle of their whispering they clutch at the air trying to hold on to some atomic remains of what used to be a library. The library of Memorious has no books.

When the city administrators decreed that the library of Memorious was to be burnt down, a band of bibliophiles memorized every single book in the library. Now they speak the books out loud to anyone who is willing to listen; the words roll off their tongues in an erotic frenzy.

They have been successful where many lovers have failed;
in a perfect blurring of boundaries with their beloved
they have become living books.



Jahiliya

It is here that the Gods are born out of half-formed intuitions and clumsy neologisms, and here that they come to die as hapaxes and printers' devils, for the Library of Jahiliya consists of all the books that are, have been, and will be held holy by humans: a cenotaph for the mind's endless misprisions, or – what is the same thing – a monument to hope.



Linearis

The Linearis has three simple rules. As a testament, perhaps, to its finitude, you are allowed to read one book at a time. If this resembles any other library operating in a condition of scarcity, the second rule may sound unusual. The Linearis, it turns out, does not permit you to begin a new book till you finish the one you hold in your hands. And if even that does not seem out of the ordinary, consider this startling final condition: the Linearis will prescribe your books for you, every single time.

Who had dreamt up this system? What disgruntled administrator had decided to ease the burden on his domain by ensuring that idle minds did not stray from the path charted for them? Was there a purpose to this education, to the progression from one book to another? Was every reader a subject of the State of Linearis, destined to be mind-controlled through this project, or be stuck in literary limbo if he failed to acquiesce to its demands?

If the demands of Linearis strike you as not unreasonable, consider that moment where you battled valiantly through Joyce's *unfacts* only to fling him in disgust as they became *too imprecisely few to warrant certitude*. Or consider

the moment when, weighed down by the melancholy of Istanbul, you reached for the oasis of Durrell's buoyant prose. And now think of the millions who stand within the folds of Linearis, unable to take in one more line of the book they hold, at the same time yearning to leap to the next one. They line up every day to make their case to the librarian, who gently nods his head and points to the rules. The readers shuffle back to their texts – some with heads drooped despondently, others with renewed fight. Always, they look covetously towards the ones who wait in line to receive a new book, the final lines of their previous effort reverberating in their head.

Know this. Only the most unfeeling, the most disciplined of readers are able to navigate the rules of Linearis. They alone are untouched, they alone, untransformed.



Spiderlight

The twilight hangar of this research library contains all past and present works that have influenced each other. The opening of any text activates its access to the system, but it may also be remotely activated using a search engine: a searcher can request the activation of, say, all texts that make use of the phrase 'Golgi apparatus', or all those that cite *Troilus and Cressida*.¹ In a search, each allusive phrase or idea is highlighted in a text, and a beam of light connects that highlight to its counterpart in the originating text,²

¹ Such remote searches are tightly controlled, due to their disruptive effect on individual searchers' work within the stacks. Remote search time is scheduled far in advance and competition for it has led to many attempted bribes and charges of corruption against the library staff. The sheer physical demand of an on-site search makes remote research appealing even for those who live in close proximity to the library. While the library has reluctantly allowed small electric scooters to be used to speed research, all individual researchers are also required to sign a health waiver and carry a tracking device in case their bodies need retrieval. This policy has been in place since the unfortunate incident with Professor Badabudara one summer holiday.

² While a great wonder of this system is its ability to pair a text to the most primary source for it, many have agitated for a control which would allow researchers to identify the most recent source instead, or at least the one that the writer had used. While the librarians acknowledge that the technology

creating a web of light beams.³ This highlighting system can be turned off for ease of reading, and when seeking a particular source, the contrast can be increased to individual beams the searcher wishes to trace.⁴ Searchers may colour-code the beams, either by manually selecting a filter and assigning colours (e.g. nonfiction sources may have a blue beam, while poetry could be orange) or automatically cycling through the basic colour spectrum (the first highlight is red, the second orange, etc.). To prevent fruitless sidetracks, bringing in photocopies is strictly forbidden.⁵ Occasionally, researchers make use of

could be so adapted, others protest against doing so, with appeals to the fantastic improvement in science reporting and the like under the current system, in which what the original research really said can be immediately compared to the mangled representation of it in the media.

³ 'Light' is technically not the correct word, as these beams are capable of going in a straight line between the highlighted phrases in each text without interruption to the beam or damage to the intervening materials. However, it is perceived by the human eye as a beam of light. To make the beams easier to trace to their source, work is being done to create beams that will curve around corners rather than going in a straight line; however, progress is slow and experts are engaged in heated arguments as to whether it will ever be possible.

⁴ Before this feature was developed, searchers would spend bitter hours, especially when researching particularly allusive texts, in tracing out the single correct thread of light from the starburst of the original book.

⁵ There are documented cases of rival researchers maliciously planting photocopies of important source texts so

a book's subsystem search option, in which only internal references are activated. The beams arc out of the book and back in a chrysanthemum of light.

as to stymie the work of their enemies. While one would think the time-sensitive nature of scientific publishing would make this more likely in such fields, most prosecuted cases have been in the humanities.



Logotopia

There are no maps of the library of Logotopia. It is, after all, pointless to create a map for a structure that defies Euclidean laws of space; one that chooses, instead, to create its own architectural norms modelled on forests whose topography depends on the hunger of tides. In fact, Logotopia was initially not even a library – it began as the modest home of a man who made his living reading to blind men.

Perhaps it was the accumulated Karmic goodwill of many a grateful patron for whom the book existed not as an object but as words that travelled through space intermingling with other creatures and spirits of air. But in a city where real estate trumped everything else, there was only so much money to be made as a reader. Through his meagre savings, Alberto could only afford to buy a tiny room which he hoped he would fill with the books gifted to him by those he had read aloud to and who had no other use of the object.

The room he bought was in fact owned by one such listener: a blind man, Zampano, who died listening to Alberto's voice. Having carefully measured the length and breadth of the room to optimize the little space that he had, Alberto was surprised to find that he had been an inch short in his measurement. The second time around

he was careful to record the exact dimensions on a piece of paper. Yet again, the next day, he was confounded by the fact that he was now off by a whole three inches and the shoes that he had carefully placed against the wall seemed isolated from their backrest. It was only a week later – after having consulted all the architects he knew, a few Feng Shui experts and finally, even an exorcist – that he started seeing a pattern. The house which by then had expanded twenty-four inches in length and breadth corresponded to the twenty-four books that had added to the room. Could it even be possible, he wondered – softly, afraid that even voicing his thoughts beyond a whisper would invite speculations about the state of his mind.

In the most tentative way possible he began experimenting – first to confirm his own sanity, then with a sense of playfulness, and finally, with reckless abandon. After the first hundred books it was easy enough to confirm that the incremental length and breadth of his house was coterminous with the number of books that he added to the bookshelves. What was more interesting for him were the spatial experiments he conducted in redesigning the house based on the choice of his books. Ten consecutive days of modern poetry converted his curved sofa into a straight-backed, long rectangular brown chaise longue that fit perfectly into the right angles of the top left corner of his now extensive living room. Five Marquezian days later a skylight had merged on his ceiling from which a shaft of moonlight descended every night to illuminate hidden hieroglyphic patterns on his

carpet. By the fourth month his ever-expanding house resembled a circular garden with a hundred forking paths. One day, however, he risked it all by bringing in five Sebalds. The rain that night virtually guzzled up his entire collection and the next day he was left with merely twelve rooms. Logotopia has since grown more languidly and on most days you can find the house stretched out, its lawns laid out and its storage rooms curled up around its bookshelves.



Dermestes Lardarius

Unlike his more illustrious namesake who bequeathed his name – in addition to a collection of acclaimed novels – to two rare species of butterflies, Vladimir Pelashian would only be remembered by a select few who shared his ardour for the subterranean vermin who live and feed off the pages of books.

He had set it upon himself early in life to rescue the reputation of these bookworms after he had encountered four well-eaten volumes of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* – a reputation he felt had been maligned by human readers who were intolerant of these fellow creatures of the book seeing them, narrowmindedly, as pesky destroyers of their beloved books. Vladimir realized the folly of his fellow men and recognized that there was much in the natural world that lay beyond the comprehension of a limited rationality that placed man at the centre of the reading world. Why would these vermin – whose natural inclination was to raw wood – choose such a specific form of food if not for the fact that they saw the passionate consumption of the written word as being an inherently more tasty climb up the steep hierarchy of beings. And yet they continued to be misunderstood and classified in a generic manner on par with lowly sofa crunchers, blanket snackers and even raw plant feeders.

Having no fancy jars with which to label and thereby museumify these carnal consumers of knowledge, Pelashian decided that the only way to showcase the virtues of these worms was in their natural habitat – within the pages of books we know but fail to recognize through a very different kind of reading. His initial intuition had been confirmed when the first copy that entered his library – the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* – came to him chewed right through till the 87th page after which the pages were pristinely uneaten. It validated his belief in the discerning taste of his page-starved friends since he himself had been unable to go beyond page 87 of the same book. Only someone with a finely developed microscopic sensibility like his could have discerned the hidden patterns left in the tiny holed pages after they had been visited by bookworms. No, these creatures of the book were not merely reading or eating their way through a book; on a very close reading you would find they were actually rewriting the book. Pelashian pitied Barthes with his limited anthropocentric understanding that failed to account for the incredible contributions made by these writerly readers.

The library now serves as a worthy museum of half eaten, half rejected books testifying to the fact that the bookworm may have had the last laugh yet for if Nabokov had lent his name to two species, the epithet of the bookworm had been inherited by many more of the human species – those who like to eat poetry-ink running from the corner of their mouths and who understand happiness in the way of insects.



Origin Myth 1

Jorge Luis Borges
Biblioteca Nacional Argentina
Agüero 2502,
C1425EID
Buenos Aires, Argentina

24th August 1955

Ms. Emma Bovary
Mr. Ibn Battuta
Mr. Italo Calvino

My dearest friends

Please forgive me in advance for writing collectively to the three of you. If I were the recipient of a letter not solely addressed to me, I would see it as a moral failure on the part of the sender but in epistolary matters as in life, we are prone to a generosity with our own faults, which we could scarcely tolerate if committed by others.

You are aware that my eyesight even in the best of times has been less than sympathetic to the arduous labour that I subject my eyes to, and in the last few years, I have braced myself to the possibility that these fickle companions of mine would one day abandon me altogether. I cannot bring myself to curse my fate and can only consider myself

fortunate for the worlds they have revealed to me. Though I have to confess that I have occasionally directed a few unkind words at St. Lucy's sense of humour, especially when she has conspired with the fading evening light to frustrate my completion of a book.

Thus, when I was informed three months ago by the considerate Dr. Leonardo that I was officially blind it came almost as a relief. People often think of the blind as living in a world of complete darkness but that is far from the truth. I can still make out certain colours; I can still see blue and green. Not having yellow is sometimes distressing since it becomes difficult to discern the passage of time without it but thankfully my tigers have always been blue so I continue to enjoy their friendship.

I was also fortunate that a few friends and well-wishers, including the young Alberto Manguel (for whom I foresee a bright future in the world of letters), have very kindly offered to read to me for a few hours a day. I had therefore settled comfortably, to corrupt the poet's words, into the armchair of the inward eye and negotiated a peaceful treaty with my books, settling for their cadence even if denied the imprint of their singularity.

I was therefore taken aback when the government named me director of the National Library in Buenos Aires. That evening I composed a few verses which I am tentatively calling 'The Poem of Gifts'. I hope these lines will convey what I felt towards you.

*No one should read self-pity or reproach
into this statement of the majesty of God,
who with such splendid irony
granted me books and blindness at one touch.*

So many of my memories are tied to this building on the Calle México in Monserrat, in the South of the city. My father, a professor of psychology, used to take me there at night (a privilege that very few then enjoyed), and while he would immerse himself in books by Bergson and William James, I – being too timid – would leaf through the closest volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, reading things at random. I remember one night when I was particularly rewarded, for I read three articles: on the Druids, the Druses, and Dryden – a gift of the letters *dr*. Other nights I was less fortunate.

For someone who has always thought of paradise as a kind of library, returning here feels a bit like Adam and Eve being welcomed back to Eden, but this time with an additional prohibition that extends not just to apples but to all the fruits in Eden. But like them (or at least I imagine) there is no place I would rather be to wait out the last few years that I have. I am not alone in my iron and it will interest you to know that Senor Groussac, whose position I am inheriting, was also blind. It is a privilege to follow Groussac since he honoured literature with books far superior to mine. And as men of letters, we have both passed through the library of forbidden books – one might say, for our darkened eyes, of blank books, books without letters. But now that I find myself in a position, at

least for a few years, of being able to shape the direction that the library takes, I turn to you my friends.

Milton has a sonnet in which he speaks of his blindness. There is a line one can tell was written by a blind man. When he has to describe the world, he says, 'In this dark world and wide'. It is precisely the world of the blind when they are alone, walking with hands outstretched, searching for props.

I have spent many hours with all of you either in libraries or talking about them, and if I were able to, I would have wished before the commencement of my term as director to travel to a number of libraries (familiar and unfamiliar ones). Thankfully, the budget that I have been allocated is a little more impaired than I am. I would like to invite the three of you to be my wandering eyes and I am certain that your accounts will all but transport me to these logotopias and assist me in extending the vision of the library that I now find in my charge.

I hope that this project will be of interest to you, and should you agree to be a part of it, I would be eternally obliged to you.

Yours truly,
Jorge Luis Borges



Library of Abelard

So frail is the library of Abelard that its walls seem nothing more than compressed slabs of mist. From a distance, they appear to float like skeins of ragged wool. The bookshelves within are thick cobwebs strung together with their contents dangling precariously on silvery nets.

This is one of the oldest libraries in the Southern ocean.

Age has played tricks on its memory, permeating its walls to cast a spell on the books housed within. The incantation operates in a curious manner: regardless of how many times you may have read a particular book, in the ancient air of Abelard it will be as if you are reading it for the first time. The moment you turn the first page is the moment you lose all memory of any prior engagement with the text.

And so it is that millions flock here annually in a unique pilgrimage, attempting to experience their most beloved texts afresh. People are found tracing their fingers around the edges of a selected book, bristling with evident anticipation. As they flip it open, a charge passes through their bodies, their shoulders slackening ever so slightly. The animated look in their eyes is replaced by blank curiosity, as they recheck the title they hold. Deciding to continue reading this unknown text, they will often

remain rooted to the spot, now a burst of surprised laughter, then a quiet smile playing on their lips.

Abelard's gift is also its curse. The textual memories it erases come with a heavy collateral: gone, too, are any associations the reader has with the book. The losses range in their degree of severity – a memorable conversation, a parent's narration – always chipping away at the marginalia of its pilgrims' lives.

Sometimes, the losses are greater.

At its most cruel, lovers walk into Abelard only to emerge as strangers.



Viña del Mar

The lovers escape through a window in the back of the library; left behind, their clothes squirm in the warm shadows of the stacks.

This is the Library of Viña del Mar, the library of the lovers, where books, superseded forever, stammer to their end in fuddled outrage.



Birkertsia

'Have you ever in the course of your wanderings chanced upon a library which you never desired to leave?'

The same question from any other person could have been taken at face value but coming from Borges, Calvino knew that this was not just a question about libraries. Borges was asking him to reveal something about himself. When an itinerant reader finds a place to settle down he gives a measure of the distance he has travelled.

Calvino took his time to answer but when he did there was no hesitation or uncertainty in his voice. A lover who I lost led me blindfolded once to the library of Birkertsia. Once there she asked me to step inside alone. The building seemed small for a library – in fact, it seemed like a replica of my own house. The furniture in the main room mirrored the way my living room was arranged right down to the old Oakwood table that I used to write on. The shelves were not organized in any known form of classification, and the cold austerity of order had not yet settled on them. The moment I laid my hands on the first book I realized where I was. Birkertsia contains books that have been written only for you. For sure there may be other copies of the same book that people have access to but they do so as eavesdroppers rudely overhearing a private conversation. In Birkertsia you don't read books,

you listen to their distinct voice as they address you and you alone. The copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* even had the same dog-eared pages that my copy had and the same notes that I had made. A book of Frank O'Hara's poems opened knowingly to 'The day lady died' in the way that the waiters at my local café bring me my usual double espresso with biscuit.

The book in Birkertsia is the private place that we own, and is custom-made to fit our perfect and imperfect selves. One never leaves Birkertsia voluntarily, one is only displaced.



Library of Lack

At first glance, the Library of Lack belies its name. Its grand arches loom as far as the eye can see, its shelves teetering vertiginously. The librarian nudges you to its astonishing catalogue which seems to hold every book you have ever imagined. Hushed, rumbling murmurs are evident as you stroll past its bookshelves. Browsing familiar titles, the first bit of unease grips you.

The books seem ... smaller. Leaner.

Gone is the muscular heft of *A Suitable Boy*, replaced instead with a diminished, if still athletic frame. Where *Animal Farm*'s brevity once made it easy to miss on a quick perusal of its shelf, the version held by the Lack resembles a large pamphlet. And yet, in either case, when you quickly flip the pages in your hands, you greet them with a spark of recognition.

More at ease now, you pick a copy of *Great Expectations*, and sit back to read about Phillip Pirrip's coming of age. A hundred and fifty pages in, you are intoxicated by Estella, horrified at Miss Havisham, and questioning the motives of Pip's mysterious benefactor. The world has fallen away and all that is important is the knowledge of where Pip's life will go, when his next meeting with Estella will be and what —

You gasp, as the book trails away to blankness. No pages have been removed, no words have been erased, but there it is, this story that simply stops, no resolution offered. You notice the murmurs around you again and realize that they belong to the many disgruntled readers who are reaching their own individual non-resolutions.

As you walk out of the door bristling with frustration at this lack of resolution, you wonder if Estella has reciprocated Pip's affections, if Pip himself will indeed become a gentleman. And Miss Havisham, trapped in her bridal gown, forced to dwell on the memories of her incomplete wedding, fixated on an imagined life:

You realize that Lack has made you its own Miss Havisham.



Mernarcopiam

After the great ecological disaster of 2050 when the governments of the world collectively decreed that there would be no more books published in order to conserve wood, a secret sect called the Bellowans started an underground movement. Across the bridge that divides the old city from the new lies the headquarters of the Bellowans who know each other only by colour. Needless to say membership to this sect is limited and strictly governed by the availability of colours and there is a considerable waiting period before one is granted admission.

Born out of a strange desire to marry romanticism and modernism the group has a picture of the German thinker Walter Benjamin affixed on the wall of their office and is dedicated to collecting what they describe as works of love in the age of mechanical reproduction. Started by the student of an English teacher as a tribute to the latter after he passed away, the library collects full texts which have been hand-copied. It is said that the teacher – a devoted reader of Guy Davenport – found a copy of a Davenport novel in a small library while travelling. Unfortunately for him, the library policy did not allow for either the borrowing of the book or its photocopying. The professor sat, pencil in hand, for a week, invoking the ghosts of scribal past, and copied down the entire novel.

On returning to his home city, he proceeded to type out the entire novel and then photocopied it to distribute among his students.

One of his students – a recipient of this gift – went on to become one of the leading atomic physicists in the world, and dedicated his life to studying the harnessing of subliminal energy. He believed that any human activity that replicated with a lot more effort and time the tasks done by a machine was not a waste of energy but the production of surplus energy and it was only a matter of figuring out ways of tapping this energy. Experimenting first with converting emotional energy into renewable energy forms he published his first paper on how spite could be used to power a washing machine. Over a period of time he developed a sophisticated taxonomy of energy forms and thus was born the sect of the Bellowans. The sect believes that by assembling works of a similar nature in a single librarymachine, it would be possible to solve the problem of scarcity in the world. Each copy of a handwritten text, they argue, contains an ontological surplus and the entire library itself is a complex machine capable of transforming the surplus of individual books into electromagnetically charged particles which combine to produce printable paper. The sect is now working on ways in which an enmeshed network of such libraries can be connected across the world through a giant transmitter allowing for people to distribute and share the surplus energy, and is confident that in twenty years they will completely solve the paper shortage problem.



Neopolis

There is an infinite appetite for distraction in Neopolis. Massive welcome signs are dwarfed by even larger billboards announcing the latest attraction in the city. At nights the lattice of neon lights extends in all directions so that temporary blindness is a common ailment of the first time visitor. The cinematheques famously project four productions onto the same screen so that the viewer can switch from one to the other as they get restless. An average song broadcast by any of the thirty-odd radio stations lasts about fifteen seconds. And with conventional books having long become obsolete, the library exists co-terminus with what is called the book museum. The signboard outside proudly proclaims how the library hosts one of the largest collections in the region, which makes the discovery of its rather insignificant size all the more surprising. Only then does one realize how perfectly the library complements the people of Neopolis.

Enterprising citizens had long ago realized that the book-length spans of traditional manuscripts had outgrown the attention spans of their fellowmen. They set about creating summarized versions of the texts – starting with the classics, then moving on to popular contemporary texts. As the summaries grew shorter and more popular, the format became more attractive to authors. Novels became novellas, anything longer than a hundred pages

would be mercilessly reframed at the editing board or simply rejected outright. A few decades in, the book-page was born, and this is what the library of Neopolis houses.

Every book in the collection exists in the form of a single, summarized sheet. Some of the shorter novels take up only a few sentences on their assigned page, while the *Remembrance of Things Past* greedily spills out onto part of the overleaf. It is thus quite possible to visit the library and read ten books in a short span of time – a feat which would be hard to replicate anywhere else, Neopolitan citizens proudly point out. Even better, for the reader-on-the-go, there are three-to-five word blurbs behind each page, summarizing the summary. If the *Pride and Prejudice* blurb helpfully informs us: ‘marry or die’, Plato’s *Symposium* is summarized as ‘drunk man love’.



Nakojabad

The library at Nakojabad consists solely of the silence that its librarian compels you to maintain within its precincts.

It is no ordinary silence.



Fanafilhaq

When the Argentine (quoting, perhaps, a Persian who in turn was quoting your mind or mine) said that paradise was a library, he disclosed a limit of human dreaming no less clearly than did the Greek when he proposed an afterlife made up of endless philosophical conversation; for libraries, like colloquies, are hallowed by our need for enchantment and instruction, our yearning for force and delight, but paradise, if it is paradise, knows nothing of yearnings or needs.

And so it is that in the Library of Fanafilhaq, which is not a library, the only books you find will not be books, and it will not be you who finds them, and it will not be a finding.

The Library of Fanafilhaq, of which we cannot dream.



Barataria

Although it has been almost a decade, Ibn Batuta's skin still quivers with awe and dread as he recalls his experience at the library of Barataria. To ready himself to tell his tale Batuta begins with a story of the invention of chess, knowing Borges' weakness for the game.

'It is said,' Batuta begins, 'that the inventor of this strategic game, when asked by the emperor how he wished to be rewarded, answered with a simplicity that almost annoyed the king. He asked for a single grain of rice for the first square of the chess board, followed by two for the second, four for the third, and so on till the 64th square.'

Batuta could see Borges do the math in his head. On the 12th square he described the library of Barataria, surrounded on all sides by fecund land. It seemed to grow out of the soil, enmeshed with creepers and branches of trees that had seen little discomfort. It was therefore a little surprising for Batuta to walk into a large room filled with empty bookshelves save for one lonely book in the middle shelf in the heart of the library. The barrenness of the library almost seemed an affront to its surroundings. It took, Batuta recalls, less than seven hours for him to finish the somewhat uninspired tale of a sailor from Baghdad lost at sea. No sooner had he replaced the book on the shelf and readied to leave the library that he caught

sight of two more books. Perhaps he had not noticed them earlier. The second book contained a reference to a battle that Batuta, despite his wide reading and travels, was unaware of. He wished that he could find out more about it. Since that was not to be he proceeded to the third book.

His wanderings had not been kind on his back and halfway through the third book he longed for a soft bed. All he could see around him, however, were more straight-backed chairs. There were neither clocks nor windows in the room and it was only the clear sound of crickets that informed Batuta that it was well into the night when he finished the third book. Turning his fatigued eyes towards the shelves he saw that four more books had surfaced on the phantom shelves.

Unable to continue and yet unwilling to give up, Batuta took up the challenge as only foolhardy adventurers do. If only he had known then the fate of the emperor's offer to the chessmaker, he would perhaps have left after completing the seventh book. His son was barely two when Batuta had kissed him goodbye and when he returned from Barataria, barely able to see or walk without aid, he was greeted by a young man with a boy in his arms who looked like his son but not quite. The man turned to Batuta and said "Father? You have been away twenty-seven years," but all Batuta saw was a faraway library whose shelves had given way under the weight of books and a growing mountain of unread copies awaiting his return.



Googol

At first, you are convinced that Googol is a mirage. Though parts of it resemble any other solid edifice, others seem vaguely translucent when illuminated by the setting sun. As you enter, a number of bookshelves seem to physically flicker in the manner of light bulbs emanating their dying incandescent gasp. Every corner you turn, you encounter that same fleeting quality. You pause at the section with the romance novels, a genre you have largely frowned upon. The flickering is strongest here, the books seem to be teetering on the verge of oblivion. You chuckle as you pick out a copy of *Love Story*, the one book on this shelf you recall enjoying. And yet, as you open its first page and begin to read the infamous opening lines, you can't help but shudder with a newfound sensation of banality. Somewhere between the narrator's listing of Bach and the Beatles you slam the book shut for what you are certain is the final time. The entire bookshelf now begins to flitter in and out of space, and as you replace Eric Segal in his rightful position, it vanishes for good.

There will, it seems, be no more tales of romance for you.

As the bookshelf vanishes, you are able to see the one it was hiding from you — this one containing mythology. This is more what you're looking for, and the bookshelf

seems to bolster that thought by somehow projecting itself as indelible — you note how its outlines are more defined, how the books seem to have a more solid heft. You reach for a book on Ragnarok.

As the world slips away, as Odin dies, you fail to notice the sudden gust of air at your neck, the displacement of gaseous molecules by a new solid structure. As you snap the book shut with a sigh of satisfaction, you turn around, and are startled to discover a new bookshelf in place of the one that disappeared. A quick perusal informs you that every title here is a fragment of Norse mythology, here an entire shelf of *Beowulf*, there a treatise on the menacing Jotunheimr.

You realize then the servile nature of the Library of Googol, built to cater to your every whim and fancy, a shrine to the path of knowledge you carve for yourself, neatly disposing of every discarded thought.



Daryaganj

The city of Daryaganj was under threat of demolition when the first signs of the library made their appearance on the pavements. In their slow but monstrous assault on the city the lurid yellow bulldozers had already swallowed three streets, one spice bazaar, five small houses and the best tea stall in the world.

That's when it started: books began appearing on the footpaths of Daryaganj every Sunday morning only to disappear by midnight.

Before long they were stacking their way up along all roadside walls, propping up broken windows and tiling the damaged concrete pavements and roads. Then one night, in the manner of all inexplicable fantastical curses, their Cinderella deadline vanished and they stayed in the spaces they had occupied permanently. The library broke its banks flowing towards the rest of the city.

Today the library of Daryaganj contains the city. Books are perched on wooden ladders criss-crossing the narrow alleyways; they are stacked up around lampposts and traffic lights. The tallest buildings in the city look like titanic bookshelves and sidewalks are paved with hardbacks.

A walk through the library of Daryaganj is also a walk through the city and in your wanderings books become your guides.



Manifesta

The only thing that still bothered Jorge Otero Pailos about his newfound calling as a librarian was the sound. He tried everything but in vain – earplugs came in the way of his concentration, sharp blades tended to be quieter but risked tearing the pages, the blunt ones produced a flat gnawing of sandpaper on aluminium. Resigned to what he grudgingly described as his occupational hazard he carried on with his mission.

On good days, he could complete a tenth of a book and while a book in ten days was certainly not an impressive number in an entire library, this was no ordinary library that he was creating. What began as an art project had suddenly assumed the gravitas of a project of uncovering the truth. He was, after all, redefining the very act of reading – physically and metaphysically. Pailos' reading aides were not glasses or even something as mundane as a pencil or marker – no, Pailos read with a blade in hand. It started off innocently enough when he encountered an old red leather-bound copy of Ruskin's *Ethics of the dust*. Something was amiss – why was Ruskin referring to 'the dust' when his philosophical project was served better with just dust? And it wasn't enough to ignore the pesky presence of the unwarranted 'the'. No, he would have to efface it from the book forever and with it any future intrusion that it may have. Having started off with the

title itself there was no turning back. Pailos proceeded to read the rest of the book with his blade, discovering in the process that it is not just what one reads but what one reads away in a book that makes a genuine reader. The copy of Ruskin's *Ethics of () Dust* now stands as the proud midwife and self witness of the birth of the library of Manifesta – a fit name for a project that seeks not just to discover things but to partner them in their manifestation. Opening its first page you cannot but marvel at the profundity of Pailos' vision as you read the improved text.

I can tell you () thing; and I might take credit for () []
() telling you { } a personal reason () ()
about the creation {

} yes-yes; and its [

] now

When I visited him Pailos was busy slaving away at a thick book and while he was unwilling to share with me his work until it was complete, he showed me the first paragraph that he had slaved on for six days.

() all alike; every () in its own way. Everything
() in confusion () the () house. The wife () ()
() the husband () a French girl, () their family,
() husband () not go on living () the ()
house ()



Origin Myth 2

He had always maintained in life as well as in fiction that the ambiguous prestige of being the recipient of an urgent telegram was laced with the premonition of bad news. So when on 1 January 1964 his mother announced that he had received a cable from Letizia Álvarez de Toledo, Borges's excitement was tempered with a little trepidation.

I WAS HALF RIGHT STOP HAVE SEEN THE VOLUME
STOP THE LIBRARY OF BABEL WAS IN IT STOP YOU
ARE IN IT AS WELL STOP

Borges had never met Letizia but over the course of a long and erratic correspondence he had formed a distinct impression of her character and had been convinced that she would never let brevity come in the way of style. He was expecting a haiku, an aphorism even, anything but the cryptic note she had sent.

At any rate she had presented him with a puzzle, one that played on his mind for days. That she had chosen to write her message in an uncustomarily blunt fashion could mean one of few things:

- a) The message was sent by an imposter or, worse still, a journalist.
- b) Letizia was drunk on Catalan wine, again.

- c) She wanted him to know that she had written the message under duress.
- d) She didn't have the money to pay for a more elaborately worded cable.

And then there was the content of the message:

- a) Had she found his unpublished biography that the scourge of his life that scoundrel Auguilar had died writing?
- b) Did she know about his mother's journals, was she in possession of them?
- c) Perhaps Cesares had put her up to it.

A few weeks had passed since the mysterious cable from Letizia and all his efforts to trace her or decipher the message had been in vain. But not even the most urgent reality could claim his attention on that Tuesday evening, when it was Manguel's turn to read to him. For weeks now they had been making slow progress on Burton's translation of *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights*, their progress interrupted every once in a while by Borges's recollection of reading it for the first time as a young boy.

That evening, under the spell of the steady hum of Manguel's voice, he was about to slip into another one of his reveries when something interrupted him. Manguel's reading pace had slowed down and it felt as if he was struggling to make the transition from one paragraph to the next.

Manifesta

The only thing that still bothered Jorge Otero Pailos about his newfound calling as a librarian was the sound. He tried everything but in vain – ear plugs came in the way of his concentration...

Manguel paused and then pressed on, *sharp blades tended to be quieter but risked tearing the pages, the blunt ones produced a flat gnawing of sandpaper on aluminium. Resigned to what he grudgingly described as his occupational hazard he carried on with his mission. On good days, he could complete a tenth of a book and while a book in ten days was certainly not an impressive number in an entire library, this was no ordinary library that he was creating...*

It was immediately evident that the text did not belong to the nights and for a moment Borges was convinced that Manguel was playing a trick on him. Intrigued but undaunted, Borges dismissed him without saying a word – after all a man whose inner life is teeming with imaginary books can never dismiss the possibility that they have finally started spilling into his 'real' life unannounced. But since he couldn't recall having 'read' those words or a reference to them in his fifty-year reading career he couldn't shake the feeling that their sudden appearance in his life was a trick or a veiled affront of sorts.

The next evening, while having coffee with Cesares, Borges decided to enlist his help. Cesares brought down the dog-eared volume of *Nights* from its dusty abode on a revolving bookcase, between *Huckleberry*

Finn and *Don Quixote*. He opened it to the page Manguel had bookmarked and there it was, the errant passage, confidently interrupting Burton's words as if completely assured of its place in the book.

The Wali laughed till he showed his wisdom-teeth and said, 'O man of little wit, thrice have I seen in a dream one who said to me: "There is in Baghdad a house in such a district and of such a fashion and its courtyard is laid out garden-wise, at the lower end whereof is a jetting-fountain and under the same a great sum of money lieth buried. Go thither and take it."

Manifesta

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As Cesares read on, Borges became certain that this was no slight to his reputation as a bibliophile; if anything it was a love letter, a puzzle, an invitation to play. But with no clue of the identity of this mysterious trickster how could he play along? As if reading his mind, Cesares

quickly scanned through the rest of the book but found no other alien passages or clues.

A month passed and while Borges was consumed by the thought of the trickster he relied on the routine of his reading life to bring him some comfort. As fate would have it, Manguel stumbled upon another strange fragment in the course of reading *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* to Borges one evening. Later that night someone broke into Borges's house and made away with an odd assortment of things: Letizia Álvarez de Toledo's telegram, one silver spindle from his mother's sewing box, a first edition copy of *The Taxonomy of Sighs*, three pieces of a broken hand mirror he had never used.

By morning Borges was charged by the calming intuition that it was all connected, the fragments, the trickster, Letizia and his books. With the help of Cesares he set about the task of systematically combing through every book in his library. Once every few weeks they would stumble upon another 'note from the trickster' in one of his books and they would carefully transcribe and file it. The notes were always about a library, always in the same font as the rest of the book.

After almost a year of this there were entire days when Borges didn't think about the connection between that cryptic telegram and the trickster; the whole process of finding and filing the notes had turned into a charming routine. Until the day that he received a cable from Cesares.

IN LA PLATA STOP WENT TO THE LOPEZ MERINO
LIBRARY AGAIN STOP RUMOURS OF A POET
MUTILATING BOOKS IN THE BASEMENT NEXT
DOOR STOP IT IS JORGE OTERO PAILOS STOP
THEY ARE BECOMING REAL STOP



Asel

Asel is located at the eye of a perpetual snowstorm that has afflicted the Northern Estuary for centuries. You cross fields of ice, the earth permanently marked with craters of hail, and climb the Abyss of Silence, a steep cliff lashed with insidious sleet. The Abyss opens up into a vast plain, revealed under the moonlight to be a lake of frozen ice that extends as far as the eye can see. At the centre of this lake the ice extends hexagonally upwards to form a structure that shoots high into the sky, its topmost spires piercing the Northern Lights. This is the abandoned Library of Asel.

A momentary blindness paralyses the first time visitor, for every object within is carved from ice. A million reflections bounce off each other, expanding the already cavernous space into infinity. As you adjust to the surroundings you will notice rows of symmetrical stalactites that hang from the ceiling of each level. An unnatural hand must have intervened here for they stand, hundreds of them, at perfectly measured equal distances from each other. The space between two successive stalactites is just enough to wedge individual sheets of ice etched with the words: 'the books of Asel'.

As you remove a book from its place and peruse the intricate carvings made by Asel's inhabitants eons ago,

you find that it begins to melt at your touch, the text fraying around the edges. In panic you replace it in its column and move closer to parse through it without your hands. But now your breath mists over the words and before you are able to cognize them, they start to delicately bleed into each other. You can tell you've come across a particularly beloved book when the sheets are almost completely blank.

Like half-remembered dreams the books of Asel elude you the more you try to hold on to them.



Orexia

Knowing that a library complicates desire by investing it with the shadow of substance, we look to this library to teach us the desires we are destined to have, and to resign us to their fulfilment or their thwarting: we look to the Library of Orexia, fluid and impalpable as the form of our wantings, the pattern of our intentions; the intellect's final self-blandishment before it passes beyond the desire even to know itself.



Penrhyn

The library at Penrhyn once contained only copies of the catalogues of other libraries, but when its patrons stopped consulting those catalogues, preferring to limit their researches to the catalogue of the library itself, the obsolete volumes were sold off, until all that remained was the catalogue of the library at Penrhyn that now contained the sole entry 'The Catalogue of the Library at Penrhyn,' and when those words were carved in a slab of roof-slate and the rest of the building was demolished, the people of Penrhyn rejoiced, for theirs was a thing both modest and inexhaustible: the perfect union of a library, its contents, and its catalogue; an index of the distant Trinity.



The National Library of Cinvar

Cinvar's is a curious case — a landlocked nation surrounded by six flourishing democracies, it continues with a centuries-old dictatorial regime. Every successive generation of the Rainarn family that has ruled over the country has faced a countervailing absence of resistance in any form. This peaceful co-option becomes all the more curious when one considers how the nation has amongst the sharpest rates of income inequality in the world or that State citizenship is only provided to individuals acceding to the official code of Christianity.

Some say it all started with the Great Re-classification project of the National Library of Cinvar. The project itself quite possibly began as a mistake, a practical joke or even a form of literary criticism. Perhaps a feminist feeling angry about Bianca's ultimate fate replaced *The Taming of the Shrew* from the comedy to the tragedy section. Maybe an embittered schoolboy long ago decided that *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was better categorized as fantasy. At any rate, the library rapidly began to constitute a new regime of knowledge through a reordering of its existing classifications.

The Rainarn regime didn't believe that censoring dissent would be the most effective solution; instead, why not recast problematic texts as something to be mocked

at or scorned? Thus it was that Marx and Engels were relegated to science fiction, while *A Tale of Two Cities* came to be regarded as a classic horror novel. Religion in all its multiplicity also posed a threat to the regime – where the Bible was placed in the history section, every other religious text was pushed to fantasy. Cinvar also regulates the tenor of what its citizens laugh at: The Diary of Anne Frank stands in the humour section, right beside the hilariously doomed efforts of transgressive lovers Romeo and Juliet and Alfred Kinsey's rib-tickling suggestion that sexuality could exist on a spectrum.



Origins

Books echo with quotations or allusions, explicit or uncited. The Library of Origins displays the parents of these ideas, these idioms, these shared characters that populate more books than they're born in.

Orthogonal to every book is a shelf containing the source of each phrase, reference or borrowed idea in that book. These sources are organized by order of appearance in the book, and with a code on the spine that contains the page and line number in which it appears. With mangled sayings that conflate multiple quotations (e.g., 'There's many a slip between a horse and a nail for want of which a kingdom was lost'), the sequence is decided by the order of the first word that can be uniquely traced to a particular quote. In cases of misquotation so staggeringly inept that order is indeterminable, alphabetical precedence by author prevails. If there are multiple authors of the same nom de plume (or, in the case of Anonymous, non de plume), the references are ordered by the estimated date of the source.

The Library of Origins leans dimensionally slantwise to any book in the world. It is also recursive, for a similar shelf is generated for each of the books on the library shelves, and a further shelf for each of those, creating spiralling offshoots of reference into perpendicular

dimensions to avoid crashes. In some cases, these end quickly (especially in some of the more experimental forms of fiction) but others lead to quasi-fractal iterations with no known end. Unexpectedly, some of the most banal writing can generate much more complex shelving patterns than those of more erudite and literary works. In most cases, the farthest of the ancestral shelves can be drawn from the same small catalogue of generating texts.

Pending the invention of a dimension-travelling device, access to this library is impossible, but its transdimensional presence is something that a reader can, with some effort, discern. For casual readers, most pages open no path to the library's world. But for the exceedingly well-read, the transdimensional leap is nearly made. The books of the Library of Origins come closer, hovering behind each page, seen without touch.



Tactilis

Millions of bibliophiles arrive at the gates of Tactilis to experience unlimited intimate proximity to their beloved books but the founders of the library of Tactilis have a perverse sense of nomenclature; misled by their trickery the readers soon find out that the truth of the library and its name are irreconcilable.

The outer walls of the library have been fashioned from black mirrors. The main entrance leads to a wide corridor with bare steel walls that merges into a large circular hall. The hall has a white antiseptic glow we have come to associate with hospitals and its walls are lined with glass shelves. In the centre of the room, rows of readers sit silently at small reading stations staring into white screens. You start to look around for the books only to realize you will find none on the pristine shelves of Tactilis. The girth of *War and Peace*, the heady musk of a tenth edition *Pride and Prejudice*, the faux leather cover of *To the Lighthouse* are all gone – the exquisite singularity of trifles is cruelly flattened at Tactilis. Here all books are read in a uniform font on identical 13-inch screens.

Rumour has it that Tactilis was founded by a sect of ardent readers who revered content over physical form. Here, one must only be concerned about the philosophical weight of a book, not the pleasure of its physical weight on your lap.



Mneumonia

It is said that the most effective antidote to an illness requires the creation of a cure that is in part derived from the illness itself. The library of Mneumonia, which was designed more as a hospital than a bookspace, floats above in the sky since it is built from the lightest of materials – forgetfulness. Every time someone forgets a book that they had previously read or loved, the book slowly disappears from their shelves and finds its way into Mneumonia. Mind you, this does not happen automatically and there are strict rules for what may be allowed into Mneumonia.

The first warning that is issued is a gentle reminder, sent via a casual reference to the book. The second warning is less subtle and manifests itself in writing. It hides itself in footnotes and references but nonetheless serves as a clear reminder to the owner. And if these two warnings fail, then a final appeal is made to the owner via the appearance of the book itself – never in an overt fashion, though. The book slips out of its hiding place and places itself carefully within sight of the reader; if it is not rescued within twenty-four hours it is called to Mneumonia, the resting home of forgotten books, where it serves not a single owner but a larger public. Mneumonia has over the years emerged as one of the most efficient places for curing amnesia. In moderate cases of amnesia, for instance, even small doses of books have proven to be an effective

remedy. In one instance the constant repetition of the line ‘it was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ is said to have cured a patient of his temporary amnesia. In severe cases, however, the entire library is brought into the diagnosis and a careful combination of extracts from books is administered to the patient. What, you may ask, happens if the original owner remembers the book after it has been sent the Library of Mneumonia? The owner is indeed entitled to recalling the book but he has to pay a longing fine computed on a careful consideration of need and intensity. When the intensity of a reader’s longing exceeds his functional need of the book he is entitled to reclaim his book, but forgotten books like forgotten loves do not return that easily. The book is sent in a disguised form (dog-ears, food stains, curling of pages are all effective camouflages) to Domus where it waits for a fortuitous visit by the reader. If the reader still fails to recognize his book he is deemed unworthy of it and the book is retired into the services of Mneumonia for perpetuity.



Number 550, South State Street

Tucked in the middle of a row of red brick houses in the suburbs of Chester is a large white building with lines of ivy creeping across its side. A triangular flight of stairs leads up to its square portico entrance. The librarian's seat as you enter is usually unoccupied — you will, instead, find him busy pursuing his nemesis, the local schoolchildren, in a power struggle over noise levels. Realizing he is fighting a losing battle, he ultimately resorts to turning off his hearing aid and glowering in his seat at other more innocent users.

Past his desk the library opens up into a larger room, with an identical one right above. You will find three elongated wooden tables in the centre of both rooms surrounded by straight-backed wooden chairs. Around the tables and perpendicular to the walls are rows of steel bookshelves. The shelves are arranged according to genre, and then internally in alphabetical order based on the author's surname. For the reader's assistance a large shelf stands across from the librarian's table, with little boxes labelled in the order of the alphabet. As you pull out each letter and its corresponding box, you get a list of the authors and their corresponding shelves in the library. A recent acquisition is a computer terminal next to the shelf that indexes the titles so that users can search their location directly. The terminal has made the manual system into a

bit of a novelty, though many of its dedicated users swear by it.

Every resident of South State Street tends to have fond memories associated with the library and it is this nostalgia that makes them organize in protest every few years when the local municipality discusses possible demolition of the structure in favour of a parking lot. Meanwhile, membership rates continue to decline with every passing year, adding legitimacy to the municipality's claims.



Desiderate

The Library of Desiderate is a shape-shifting thing.

It roams the city – constantly in a state of becoming, feeding on the agonizing desires of unknown bibliophiles. You might not sense it but it is the throbbing of Desiderate's core that keeps the neighbourhood dogs up at night.

Raised from a debris of text and time Desiderate is created as much by a poor child from Saint Marcel collecting scraps of grocery wrappers to read as by a nine-to-niner in Mumbai battling sleep to get through two pages of a book on the train back from work. Though the exact appearance of the library remains undiscovered this much is clear: it is built every night, page by page, from the remains of books and second by second from time snatched from the drudgery of our days.

It is brought to life by such tenuous stuff as pieces of string, scraps of newspaper, glossy pages torn from unaffordable books, large stretchy rubber bands, old notebooks, faded photocopies, tattered poems waiting to be retrieved from the creases of wallets and minutes found dangling from the night before sleep takes over.

Drawn to the lack born of desire it will sniff you out

when it's time. Once inside, you will see that its hallways are frequented by two kinds of visitors: those who don't have the books and those who don't have the time.



Origin Myth 3

His favourite spot in the whole of the National Library had always been the little alcove in the North tower, constructed in a way that the rest of the building spiralled outwards in an expanding whirlpool. Perched here, he could survey in one go the happenings in the main reading room along with four of the chambers it opened into. Even now, as he had lost his vision he could sense the pulse of the institution simply through the creaks and groans of the floorboards from different rooms. Sharp clicks and stifled laughter meant the schoolboys were once again enamoured with the hardwood-mounted ancient Greeks; meanwhile fleet-footed hesitant lovers shuffled through Persian poetry.

Over the last years, it had all begun to fade away. Where there were once throngs of people bursting through the doors, he now sensed a heavy stillness; the sound of gathering dust on bookshelves roared in his ears more devastating than any sandstorm.

The National Library was dying.

Its finances were crumbling, its readership dwindling by the thousands – worst of all, its notoriety had plummeted. The recurring annual tales of individuals getting lost in its folds for days had now changed into sporadic annoyed

accounts of its somewhat inconvenient taxonomy delaying a reader.

Then came the letter.

His assistant had taken to leaving the correspondences that arrived in Braille on the top of his desk. This morning it had been a solitary envelope, curiously heavy though it clearly contained only paper. In later times he wondered if it was weighed down by its ideas.

It began:

Dear Sir,

You do not know me, and I doubt that I would ever come to truly know you. I write, regardless, with an unconditional offer. I am not, what is that word, a bibliophile, and yet nothing occupies me more greatly at present than the fate of our once great institution. You see, I think of myself more as a collector, a connoisseur, with the luxury of flitting from one fantastical taxonomy to another. At the age of 25, I lined a room with 490 bottles containing salt from each of the world's seas.

For the past few years, my preoccupation has been with the world of the mind, and you my dear sir have struck me as a fellow connoisseur. I watched with ecstatic joy the keys of the National Library being handed to you. I now note with regret the flailing fortunes of this great institution.

Know that I have thought long and hard about how I might be of assistance. As will be clear by now, money has

never really been a problem – I come from a lineage of oil barons who did not know what to do with their wealth. And yet, I have refrained from merely sending you a fraction of my fortune. It appears to me that the crisis of the library is not one that will be remedied by some base manner of reconstruction, some routine engineering or acquisitory project.

We need to think larger.

Over the past year, I have been curating a team. Well, perhaps a team is an inaccurate term since these people do not know of each other's existence. At any rate, I have been reaching out to a set of individuals, one at a time, to conduct a very special series of expeditions. These are people who combine traits of your standard bibliophile with an intrepid spirit of adventure bordering on the reckless. A combination, then, that perfectly suits the task at hand.

Which brings me to my grand idea. This, Mr. Borges, is what I propose.

There are, of course, the multitudes of libraries that we know of around us, the ones that make their way to guide books and city plans. But what my explorers have confirmed, and what I hope to make use of, is the existence of a range of uncharted libraries. Some of these are located at the far edges of our world, others hide innocuous under our very noses – what they all have in common is a kind of transformative potential. These are libraries that seem to both clarify and subvert our notions of taxonomizing knowledge; in these institutions are

collections that I think can truly save us. As we proceed with identifying and locating these libraries, I will conduct negotiations with the proprietors to assess the most efficient manner of acquisition and amalgamation of these institutions into our own.

I expect this to be an easy process for the most part. I don't suppose that it is a particularly lucrative enterprise running any of these establishments, and a number of them seem to have fallen into a state of disrepair. Of course, we might encounter some stubborn proprietors along the way who may prove to not be immediately amenable to parting with their collections. I have ways of convincing such individuals that we don't have to discuss here. Needless to say, I don't expect any opposition to our enterprise to be an insurmountable one.

Think, Mr. Borges, of the possibilities! Imagine the National Library as the arterial pulse of a global library, the most diverse repository of knowledge and imagination there is.

I await your response in anticipation.

Yours,

XX



Us

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a respectable library must desire to expand his domain. At times the thirst to expand his collection gets the better of him, and it is then that he abandons reason to the winds and hastens toward marriage. He reasons — if that is what you might label his flow of thought — that he will find a partner who echoes his literary interests while simultaneously expanding the boundaries of his vision. He dreams of a collection of books that rivals his own in its breadth and scope, and he imagines the pleasure of sieving and sifting out the appropriate titles and placing them in the swelling ranks of his own collection. If he pictures his partner, it is as a smiling, encouraging automaton, hands reaching forward only to assist him in stacking the books in the order of his choosing.

How naïve he is.

The Library of Us stands as a testament to such unions made or broken on the question of merging books. Every shelf represents a marriage, the books within it organized to reflect the compromise the happy couple eventually arrived at. Too many shelves feature gaping spaces split down the middle, a memorial to the couple's failure to create a federal union from their solitary selves. At times,

you sense a weary resignation as the books are thrown together without any sense of taxonomy; at others, you sense the dawning cognizance of a mismatch as attempts at careful arrangement fail spectacularly.

And then, ever so often, you chance upon a bookshelf that delights you with its intertwining of different books in a manner that makes it impossible to consider any other permutation. You find a union of opposites inextricably bound to each other – *1984* finds its rightful place next to *Brave New World*. There is often a charming wit – of course Pinocchio would have much to say to Suskind's murderous olfactophile protagonist in *Perfume*. This bookshelf is a testament not just to the love of literature: it weaves, as well, a tale of happy compromise, a story of lives that have not just been spent together, but shared.

You walk away knowing you have witnessed the perfect marriage.



Potere

Like most libraries around the world you are welcomed in Potere by a sign that says Silence except that in Potere this is a redundant admonition as anyone entering the underground vault instinctively withdraws into a hushed speechlessness. The stairs leading to the vault are damp and the walls are lined with overgrown moss – not an ideal place to store books but the library of Potere was never designed for an ideal. Inside the vault are shelves lined with thin drawers arranged chronologically. Each drawer has a label with a name followed by a date.

A creature of habit, you move instantly to the end of the 19th century and find yourself drifting to a drawer which says 'Anna Karenina (1871–1873)' and inside you find a slim volume laid upon a thin silk sheet wrapped in soft white cloth. You hesitatingly pick up the volume as if you were waking a person deep in sleep, and gently unwrapping the cloth you find yourself holding an old manuscript that has not been touched in years with a title which says Vera Zharykin. The opening line invites you in: 'Vera dreamed of a life in thought even as she was destined to be denied one' and you soon find yourself engrossed in Vera's story of her working-class-girl background and a relatively happy marriage to Igor Zharykin. Her cousin, Dmitri Bezat, a young man who dreams of becoming a scholar comes to stay with them and Vera falls in love with

him and they elope. Halfway through the book as Vera has a miscarriage brought about by the murder of their children, you realize that while all well-known books are known alike, every unknown one is unknown in its own way, and for every book that comes into being there is one that remains stillborn and our potential to be is underwritten by the potential not to be.

The library of Potere is an archive of our potential lives, a storehouse of the stories that could have been but weren't, but like the dead they do not entirely disappear, and visit us in our dreams, rendering us restless in our waking days.



Copia

'After reading your essay on the various translators of the Arabian Nights, I set out myself to look for unknown translators of the Iliad.'

A sad smile crept through Borges' face as he listened to his protégé Calvino. 'Did you find any that we were unaware of?'

Calvino replied after an unusually long and uncertain pause. 'Yes, I did. One, in the library of Copia.'

Copia is a nondescript fishing village at the south-eastern tip of Egypt, three hundred miles away from Aswan towards the Red Sea. The five hundred or so inhabitants of the village knew each other's stories and jokes by heart and most of them had even finished reading the hundred-odd books whose donation by a well-meaning anthropologist had enabled the village to start a library. It seemed, Calvino said, the most unlikely place to find an unknown translation of the Iliad. Borges nodded, his eyebrows raised quizzically. 'You can imagine how perplexed I was,' Calvino continued, 'when I picked up a mysterious copy of the Iliad and found it had been handwritten. The handwriting itself was somewhat overly courteous. My bewilderment increased as I started to read the first stanza. Gone were the invocations to the

muse and the memorable descriptions of Achilles' rage. Instead, the book was littered with clumsy descriptions of a young man's desire for the affections of his sixteen-year-old cousin. I wondered if this was some kind of a joke that Homeric scholars had been playing on each other. Casting aside this obvious hoax I glanced at the shelves and found amongst the classics more contemporary novels – all suspiciously written in the same handwriting. I picked up a copy of *Lolita* and read with disbelief the following opening lines: 'In the year 1929, Lolita set sail from New York to Cairo. She carried with her only a letter informing her that her husband had died suddenly of yellow fever.' Borges gasped as Calvino continued to read this unrecognizable Nabokov. Unaware of the horror to come, he asked Calvino if he found out who had written these books. Calvino sighed as he continued: 'After a number of enquiries I found myself outside the door of one Baniti Amsi, the retired village librarian. Many years ago, Amsi had embarked on a project armed with very few books, even lesser money, but a lot of time to spare. Based on reviews that he had read in the few journals in the library, he had decided to write the books that he himself could not afford. Little by little, over twenty years, he managed to write all the classics.'

I commended him on his ingenuity and hard work and left Copia slightly bemused. Since I had kept aside more time than I now needed in Copia, I proceeded to Alexandria to see the newly reconstructed library. Once there, I picked up a copy of *Lolita* out of curiosity. I cannot begin to describe how mortified I was when I saw the opening

pages exactly as they had been written in the librarian's copy. I was relieved to get back to Paris, and asked the taxi driver to take me straight to the Bibliothèque Nationale. I asked my old friend Monsieur Bruno Racine to bring me a copy of Nabokov's *Lolita*. 'Ah, you are interested in the debacles of an otherwise great writer I see.' I clutched the closest chair I saw, weakened by a foreboding dread. I desperately willed for the words I knew as I turned to the first page of the book and read the opening lines, 'In the year 1929, Lolita set sail from New York to Cairo. She carried with her only a letter informing her that her husband had died suddenly of yellow fever.'



Unosis

The library of Unosis has been teetering at the edge of a cliff for centuries, rocking back and forth, slowly building momentum to launch itself one way or the other at some decisive moment. Confronted by the only borrowing rule of the library its occupants sway similarly between one book and the other. Throngs of anxious bibliophiles have wandered the narrow aisles in ascetic silence for years, some of them never actually borrowing a book. Everywhere, on the high wooden bookshelves, the dark stone walls, the arms of old reading chairs and the battered desks and lecterns, a single sentence is engraved: 'You may pick any book you desire but choose carefully for you can only choose one.' In this realm of abundance where every bookshelf is weighed down by volumes spilling out of its seams, scarcity is the lone reader's talisman and guide. You are given unlimited access to the teeming shelves and fissures of the library on the condition that you can borrow and read only one book – for the rest of your lives.



Machinitum

Machinitum greets you from a distance, long before you lay your eyes on it. A low, rattling hum calls you on as you pass through remains of industrial waste from the copper refinery of Dinar. Destroyed in a great earthquake, there is curiously little that is left of Dinar, and as the soft hum gets progressively louder, you realize why.

The Library of Machinitum is constructed almost entirely from the wreckage. Giant hunks of metal have been gnashed together to create the vaguely spherical exterior. Rust has torn gaping strips between parallel slabs of the construction, allowing one to look within the structure from a distance. Even from afar it is apparent how the bookshelves consist of spiral girders wrought together at disjointed angles.

On entering you note the cobweb-strewn desk of the librarian. No queries need to be asked here – clearly, any librarians hardy enough to approach the walls of Machinitum have long since run away, driven insane by the cacophony.

And what a din it is.

The floor clangs with every step you take, the metallic sound echoing in circular loops. The shelves are part of the auditory conspiracy. Books are kept in place with

spring hooks, which clatter when their occupant is pulled out of place. Wind swirls inside the library, creeping through the rust-depleted cracks, meshing and amplifying the different sounds within. Though readers attempt to whisper to each other in a token display of decorum, their disparate voices still knit together into an additional aural blanket which wraps itself around the edifice.

It may well be that the library is trying to drill its own stories into its readers. You may not always be able to hear your thoughts in Machinitum, but if you listen, you will hear it breathing.



Timaios

For lack of a name, let us call it the library of Timaios, this library that existed only as a tale in a book about the impossibility of libraries, and was forgotten soon after the last copy of that book was reduced to ashes in one or another of history's routine conflagrations.

Let us call it the library of Timaios, if only so we may wonder what it is that we are calling it, and how.



The Library of the Descendants

The Library of the Descendants, now lost, was a single book that the Emperor Jahangir gave as a gift to the painter Mansur. The book, says Jahangir in his memoirs, was the marvel of the world, for every time it was gentled out of its silken sleeve it would be a different book, with different stories to tell, and each new story illumined by pictures of different birds and trees and mountains and rivers from different worlds of delight and voyaging.

One wonders why, if this were true, the emperor would ever have parted with the book, or how such a miracle could have been misplaced or destroyed by the hands of men. Perhaps, one thinks, the book was a book like any other, and the miracle it enclosed was merely the miracle that every book contains; perhaps the book was never anything more than a laboured symbol of the universe, like the *beau livre* of Mallarmé; perhaps the Library of the Descendants was not lost but merely rendered obsolete when its metaphor was grasped.

But how trite the world proves when all you want from it is a lesson, a meaning, a wan clarity; how superfluous its masses of detail, its teeming manifold of stories. Libraries, like people, their cousins in recombinant code, accede to no reduction from the real, be the result never so elegant; so let us try to believe, if only for a while, that the Library

of the Descendants is a real library, that it consists of a real book illumined, in a manner we cannot fathom, by ever-changing birds and trees, mountains and rivers, delights and voyages, and that it was never lost but is being held in trust for us until such time as we seek to be unlessoned of all we think we know.



Origin Myth 4

Just as other pessimists scan obituaries in the daily papers to see if anyone they knew (or – in extreme cases – themselves) were in it before deciding to start the day, Jorge Luis Borges had in the recent past taken to surveying newspapers for reports on the closing down of bookstores and libraries. He began doing this ten years ago when he decided to update Minguel Albert's *The Book of the Library* – the only existing volume that sought to create a record of every single minor library in the world regardless of its size, collection or location. The labour of one obsessed individual, 'The Book of L', as Borges affectionately refers to the tome, came to an abrupt end with the disappearance of Albert while on a trip to Lemuria. Not having either the resources or the energy to pursue the project in the way that Albert had, Borges decided that the one way that he could contribute was by adding to the index a list of libraries that had been shut down. He privately referred to himself as the Registrar of Births and Deaths of Reading Spaces. But even for someone accustomed to the steady flow of unpleasant news in the papers, it took Borges almost an hour and several cups of tea before he could reconcile himself to a small report of less than three hundred words and an inch of newspace that casually mentioned the burning down of a street in a crowded bazaar in Alexandria, since

this was the street in which a small library (named after the book) preserved the original copy of Ibn Al Nadim's *Fihrist*. Al Nadim had been an obsession for Borges for many decades. A 12th-century bookseller in Baghdad, Nadim had maintained a register in which he jotted down the details of every single book that passed through the shop, and while none of the manuscripts that he recorded themselves remain, the *Fihrist* remains an encyclopaedia of the wonderful arcane that made up the medieval Islamic world. No one knew how it was that this small library came to possess so valuable a manuscript, and while there were rumours of murder and theft, generations of careful preservation had won the Mansours impunity in the eyes of scholars and book lovers. Borges had first learnt of the library while browsing through his well-worn copy of *The Book of L*.

The fire was allegedly caused by a ravenous rat whose consistent snacking on the wires behind an air-conditioner led to a short circuit, and while there were no lives lost, since the fire happened at night and most of the stores were shut, the paper had no mention of whether the *Fihrist* or its eponymous space was affected. Borges nervously scanned the paper (and two others) with the same dread that families enquiring after their loved ones have after the news of a plane crash. Alarmed at the short shrift paid by the press to an event which had such grave consequences, he turned, instead, to his trusted guide as if confirming its existence in *The Book* would comfort him a little. Turning to the letter F (which took up sixty-odd pages between pages 370 and 432) he initially missed

the *Fihrist*, and calming himself, tried a second time, more gradually, only to find it missing again. There was the First National Library in Swansea followed by the Forrester Circulating Library in De Moine. Convinced that age was finally interfering with his impeccable ability to recall the spelling of foreign names he diverted his attention to the index but was disconcerted by its absence even in the index. When various permutations of the spelling did not yield any result and unwilling to question his conviction that it was in *The Book* that he had first read about the library, he directed his scepticism towards the *Book of L* itself and started checking if there were any missing pages. Section F did not seem to have any anomaly, so he verified each page of the book and it seemed like all 1201 pages (including the index) were intact. The only other person he knew who had a personal copy of *L* was Carlos Zufron, an old bookseller in Barcelona and someone he knew he could call a friend precisely because he would not grudge a call from Borges asking him to check in his copy for an entry on *Fihrist*. After what seemed like a century of telephonic incompetence he got through to Zufron but the call turned out to be a disappointment and one which left Zufron a little poorer in esteem as far as Borges was concerned. While he confirmed that there was no entry on *Fihrist*, he also confessed that he had heard of neither the book nor the library in which it was stored and thus could not partake and barely even empathize with the anxiety coming to him across two oceans and four time zones.

It wasn't until four months later that Borges finally got

confirmation of the burning of Fihrist. The person who wrote to him informed him not only of Fihrist but also of other libraries closing down in Kathmandu, Lagos, Brussels and one that he didn't have to inform Borges about since it was in his neighbourhood in Argentina. The last was the one responsible for him turning to *The Book of L* again. A local newspaper had asked him for a tribute to the library for which he turned as usual to the fateful book to secure some basic factual information. As any long-term librarian (and some talented civilians as well) can testify, a much loved book in the hands of a reader is a familiar object not just by virtue of its content but also the distinct shape it carves from the world and the weight it lends it. Unlike people, Borges knew, books were more reliable in matters of weight and size. He was therefore a little surprised to find his much loved volume seeming slimmer and lighter than he remembered it to be. While this for anyone else would have been a mere sign of the unreliability of tactile memory there was too much at stake for Borges, for if one could not remember how a book felt and weighed in one's hands then what other certainty remained of the world?

Opening the book, he was both relieved (that his memory had not failed him) and horrified to find that the book now contained just 1150 pages. Closely examining the book with a magnifying glass (that he often used while poring over heartless dictionaries) it was clear that there was no evidence of any physical tampering of the book and thus the only plausible explanation (one that he would hesitate to share with anyone else) was that every

time a library shut down, it also vanished from *The Book of L*. While there was no way to confirm this he at least found partial support in the fact that none of the libraries that had vanished in the last four months found a mention in the book. Being a man of rational inclinations, Borges conceded that it might well have been the case that they were never listed in the first place; so over the next four weeks he sat pen in hand, new ledger by his side, copying the name of every single library listed along with a brief summary of its history. He then verified the list with the precision of an accountant and, satisfied that there were no errors, set aside the book and his shadow list, waiting for his theory to be confirmed.

Almost as divine reward for his labour, three days after his list was ready he saw on the third column of the ninth page of the *Cronica* a brief account of the closing of the Pine River Library for lack of funds. He remembered this library from his copying of *The Book of L* and, true enough, found it listed in his catalogue. But when he tried to find it in *The Book*, it was missing.



Puritas

Having highlighted the border on the map with a darker shade of black so that people would better respect the boundaries that they had demarcated, the grand council for the preservation of cultural identities proceeded with the more ambitious part of their plan. 'Every culture,' the president of the council had declared, 'needs to ensure that its subjects are not corrupted by ideas, values or influences which are not generated from a local context.' It was therefore decided that all foreign books and authors would be purged from the library of pure thought.

At first this seemed easy enough and piles of books of alien origin were discarded from libraries and the plan advanced impressively until doubts were raised about the status of itinerant authors who were born in a particular country but had made their home in another and wrote in that language. A sub-rule was devised to deal with the problem and Promulgation 242 declared that no person who was born on foreign soil, or of foreign parents, was to be admitted within the definition of national culture.

Having resolved the matter the next tricky issue that cropped up was the status of classical writers who wrote before national boundaries had been drawn. The council in their wisdom proclaimed that boundaries were to have retrospective effect and if someone wrote

within the borders of what subsequently became a country, he was deemed to be a part of the everlasting heritage of that country alone. This solution caused an international problem of a not insignificant order as the Greeks immediately protested the cultural and historical usurpation of many of their poets by their traditional enemies, the Turks. The British similarly raised a protest over what has now been dubbed as the second Rushdie affair, arguing that while Rushdie may have been born in India, it was in the queen's land that he learnt his ABCs (not to mention the huge amount the queen spent on protecting him against the Ayatollah). The Colombians, who were having their own problems with the Argentinians, jumped into the fray and claimed that while Rushdie learnt his ABCs in England, it certainly wasn't the queen's English that he wrote in, and he was in fact quintessentially Colombian, having learnt his craft at the knees of Marquez. A laudable gambit, were it not for the fact that this prompted an appeal by Spain who demanded a linguistic exception to the territorial rule since all Spanish writers were merely the children of Cervantes.

To maintain peace and to ensure that the overall plan was not scuttled by a few technicalities, the council created an exception which allowed countries to trade (up to a maximum of fifty writers) national treasures. And what better way than to establish a common standard of measurement for calculating the cultural value of such trade. It was decided that Homeric stanzas would be the standard unit of measurement. But where trade goes the bootleg market follows and very soon an underground

market for the bartering of cultural identities was established. The bootleg market was so successful that some even established their own cultural currency and – given his peregrinations as a cultural pirate– the Ezra Pound quickly established itself as the competing standard to Homeric stanzas. In order to combat the inevitable cultural deflation that followed, the council was forced to deregulate the cultural economy and all that remains of the Library of Puritas is now a redacted file in a musty cabin within the ministry of global culture.



Yksityinenkieli

In the Library at Yksityinenkieli, we learn to infer from the smell of burnt paper the contents of erstwhile books, the details of their binding, their arrangement on long-lost shelves; we learn to pick out any volume we choose from a swirl of smoke; we learn to read what we wish to read, slowly, savouringly, with our eyes tight shut and our fingers moving in the void like the fingers of men sifting through the ashes of pyres for charred bones that are the water's due.

In the Library at Yksityinenkieli, invisible as only libraries are invisible, what may we read in but brailles of our own invention, what may we say that will not be inaudible even to ourselves?



Arcanum

Given the charge of insanity often levelled against its founders it is only appropriate that Arcanum's current incarnation is located under the ruins of the notorious Colaba Asylum built in 1745.

The founders of Arcanum are said to belong to the ancient order of Cassandra, a group of mad men and soothsayers who have been custodians of improbable truths since the siege of Troy.

The residents of Colaba only ever experience an echo of Arcanum's presence, when it comes up at dinner parties couched as an unseemly urban legend, or in the dramatized horror stories that old building watchmen can be persuaded to enact after a drink or two. The air around the library of Arcanum is thick with rumours of fabulous rituals, involving snakes licking at the ears of sleeping children and a vengeful young god spitting in the mouths of prim young women.

But only those who have been initiated into the order know that the wildest imaginations of their orientation rites cannot live up to the simple cruelty of it. For ages now, every batch of novices is taken to the library on a noisy, unremarkable night and told two mysteries. That words don't just describe the world but build it, is easily

accepted by them, but the knowledge that no one will ever believe their account of the world turns many of them insane.



Qaf

After weeks in the gibbering desert, you come to the Library of Qaf, and find nothing there but a vial of faint-perfumed glass. Inscribed on its base, in a script you do not have to know in order to read, are the following words: 'Just as every bird learns in time that it is a Bird, so every book – a many-winged bird – learns here that it is the Book of which the Library at Qaf, in which you now stand, is the image.' And there you have always stood, wherever you came from, and there you will always stand, wherever you go: in the portico of the Library of Qaf, rapt in the book that came with you on your journey.



Libraries of Limits

1.

You have imagined a library like a many-petalled lotus, like a labyrinth, a city, a mirror, an infinite beehive; you have imagined a library like the universe that contains the forms of all our voyages and so renders either itself or the universe redundant; and now it only remains, perhaps, to imagine a library unlike any of these, for nothing need take our voyages for its signs, or a beehive, a mirror, a city, a labyrinth, or a lotus for its symbols. It only remains, perhaps, to imagine a library like the library of the Heartsease Motel in Shoshoni, Wyoming, a side-table in the breakfast room where, in light that smells of coffee, a few spavined paperbacks lie stricken with wonder at having travelled so far; or the library at Vallarpadom, a few newspapers in a tin-roofed shack where fisherfolk spend a stray half-hour in the evening between the nets and the toddy: unremarkable places, humble in their local adequacy and bearing meanings that you find illegible, whose appointed task it is to be forever passing them by, but that remind you in your passing that you have reason enough to be grateful that a library can be a place in the world's compendium of places, an occasion in its anthology of occasions, and that none need dream of the Total Library, the Library Victorious, given the generosity of such half-lost and limited libraries as these, where our

failures find the dignity proper to them, and a temporary home.

2.

And when you tire of thinking about libraries that contain numberless books, libraries that contain just one book, and libraries that contain no books at all, your mind returns to your own library, and it strikes you that the existence of libraries that have a finite but undetermined number of books in them is the most baffling circumstance of all, for the dragonfly-hoverings of even the most delicate hypotheses trace firmer contours upon your mind than objects with their humble heft of the actual, and the libraries of infinitude, liveness, and nullity, so clear, so stable in your dreams of them, lay stronger claims to the title of being than this teetering wreck, this mass of decrepit thinghood trussed and bandaged at random by strips of glued paper, your kinsman in the mortal miracle, a piled-up incoherence that you will soon come to ignore, once again, in the name of its ageless idea.



The White Library

A white table and chair in a white room surrounded entirely by shelves filled with books with blank white covers and on the table a single copy of a book.

The White Library seeks to provide its readers with an experience of pure perception. Motivated by an aspiration towards a Platonic ideal of absolute and pure form, the library was started by a small sect of priests after they were expelled from their seminary. Their departure caused a scandal in the Jesuit world and came in the wake of their insistence that the phrase 'In the beginning was the word' was evidence that there was no other form of god than a book. Freed of the constraints that demanded their allegiance not to the general truth of all books but to the absolute truth of one book, these priests commenced dismantling the murky systems that had cast a foggy shroud over the truth of books.

Perhaps unable to entirely cast off their theological leaning these erstwhile priests and present-day civilians resolved to initiate a church of their own which others call the library. The White Library would be a space dedicated to books but against the untruths that came in the way of pure perception. Thus conventions of naming authors, publishers, dates or even page numbers were all hindrances that deterred pure perception.

They also denounced the systems of the old church which classified books and placed them under these fictitious categories. Why should a person be bothered about whether a book is about plants or about trekking? If there was a truth to the book it would reveal itself irrespective of the artificial clutches that had been created around it. To encounter a book filtered by such superfluous information, they argued, was to encounter not a book but a system of governance and truth regimes. The White Library therefore began by removing all signs that came in the way of the sacred relationship between reader and book – covers were ripped, titles were erased, page numbers were scratched out and once all the trappings of a book were replaced by *the book* then it was covered with a standard white cover making it indistinguishable from all other books. By knowing one book (no matter how deeply) one would limit one's insight into the possibilities of all books.

The White Library is slowly gaining popularity amongst book believers who are tired of the narrowness of their libraries which insist on false classifications that have in the past resulted in errors such as *The Tao of Piglet* being classified either as children's fiction or philosophy. But in the White Library they are merely what they are – books, the end of that for which the beginning has always been the word.



Scriptoria

The library of Scriptoria is notoriously hard to find, the façade of the building is eclipsed by the glamour of the street stalls in front of it and the narrow grey door is indistinguishable from the stained walls flanking it. There are no signboards, no outward marks of its presence; Scriptoria doesn't draw attention to itself. You have to be a librophiliac, a mad man with a tendresse for the secret lives of books in the city to find it.

Once inside you experience a frisson of recognition every time you see a book you've read appearing to emerge from the rows of titles lined up alphabetically on large mahogany shelves. Charged by the urge to flip through some of your favourites, the way one rushes to greet old friends, you reach for a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

You brace yourself, expecting to be hit by what your choleric English teacher once described as the elegiac tone of the opening lines; instead you find an unfamiliar set of scribbles and you're convinced this must be a prank. You reach for another copy of the book and find the same staccato scribblings printed on the page: Judgemental much! Fitzgerald's everyman. The Jazz Age! Ennui. Effeminate. Adjective *derogatory*: (of a man) having characteristics regarded as typical of a woman; unmanly. Knight waiting outside, dragon goes to bed with princess.

Fitzgerald's text has been elbowed out into the margins by a sweep of notes, confessions, trivia, exclamations and one phone number in green ink jotted down in bit of a hurry you're sure.

You find that in Scriptoria roles are reversed and books are consumed by the preoccupations of their readers.



Segula

Haunted by their own evitability, the flimsiness of the contingencies that brought them into being, books dream of the Library of Segula: the form, natural to their imaginings, of Fate at its most nurturing and compendious. And although the Library of Segula has little to do with us, who wish no more than that our libraries be places where the world's causal rigours yield to a mild-mannered randomness or a maffling stochastic, we recognize that our books are different from us and desire different things, and as a courtesy to them we imagine, for a moment, the Library of Segula, the home of the optative made over from an irrealis mood to an evening-coloured inflection of necessity.



Origin Myth 5

— From the Audiograph recordings of Herr. Moreau —

Lam. 18, in the year of Alef

My inquiries into the abyss of memory are going well. I have determined the existence of a quantifiable negative space which transmutes the process of reading into a productive act. The alchemy of our dialogue with the written word indisputably creates *something* — I must now trace it to the source.

Non. 14, in the year of Alef

It has all come to this, the town of Brooksville. Legend places this as the location of Morealm; the fact that the town's energy signatures do not correspond to the size of its inhabitants has led me to believe there is some truth in these stories. As I set about asking about Morealm, I am greeted by cold stares or panic. Where acknowledged, the only advice I am given is to abandon my quest and return to the devil-folds from where I have transpired.

Yet I know, I know, the answers lie here, it is this tiny crevice of the universe that holds the key.

Non. 24, in the year of Alef

Another breakthrough. My ultimate informant has turned out to be an elderly woman who lives in a house curiously devoid of books. Noticing a small bundle in my own bag she shudders with terror, finally pointing towards the town square.

I am to wait here till midnight, it appears, wait till every inhabitant of Brooksville enters the realm of sleep.

'And then what?' I persist. But she points me to the door.

Non. 25, in the year of Alef

A miracle, a wondrous miracle beyond anything I could have imagined, it exists, it is true, a miracle! I must gather my thoughts now, I must recount this to the last detail, it is too important a discovery to lose to the vagaries of my memory.

As instructed, I make my way to the town square, scouting the area for signs of secret passageways. None appear, and as the clock strikes twelve, I sit on a solitary bench in the middle of the square. A few beams of light illuminate the place, steadily disappearing as the denizens of Brooksville fall asleep. Finally, at about half past one, the final light goes out.

Again, I look around, waiting for a door to appear, an apparition to emerge. The only thing that changes is the temperature: as it plummets sharply, the pleasant

night chill becomes a solid presence, my breath misting imperceptibly into the dark.

It is then that I begin to shiver uncontrollably, that I shut my eyes, that the air is shattered by a thousand whispers. Mortal fear makes me clamp my eyes tighter; resolute determination and curiosity make me finally open them.

I am in Morealm.

It isn't that Morealm has replaced the town – rather, Brooksville has somehow transformed itself into Morealm. Every boundary has become meaningless: houses bleed into the air, which itself isn't a static presence, shivering instead with hidden possibility. As my eyes adjust to this new phenomenon, I find that the shimmering itself has a form, with defined features – it is people. All around me a legion of phantom whisperers materialize, pale figures without flesh and blood wrapped in conversation with each other. I cough – I have forgotten to breathe – but nobody notices my presence. As I take a deep breath of the air, I sense my lungs filling with the very essence of Morealm. There is a lightness that spreads across every single nerve in my body, I sense that I am untethered to the ground. The dizziness takes over me and, before I know it, I have snapped awake on the bench as the first rays of the morning sun pierce Brooksville.

I walk back to my room in a daze even as a part of me attempts to reason away this event as a dream. Even as reason starts to win over I notice my right hand. Where every other part of my body is unblemished, my index

finger has ceased to be solid matter. I can observe it as a pale echo of what it once was, but if I move it towards any other object, it simply passes through.

The air of Morealm is working on me.

Non. 26, in the year of Alef

I make my way back to Morealm the next day and begin to take in its unique spatiality. Unmoored from the laws of space, its geography folds in upon itself. Narrow street ways expand upon closer inspection into massive cathedrals; five strides in this space move me across what feels like five cities. The ideas that constitute Morealm came from books, and it is in taxonomizing its own books that Morealm creates increasingly fantastical collections. In the first city I find a library with texts classified by smell, in the second a categorization that seems to proceed by way of marital affinity. Numbers vary — there are collections that spiral off into dizzying infinities, and then there are libraries with a single book or no texts at all.

By the time I reach a library with the most uncanny silence I have encountered, I am able to catch myself. I will my very being to leave this space and snap awake on the bench, and rush to my room to record my findings. As I had suspected, I cannot use the pen anymore — all of my right hand has melted into air. My audiograph will have to do.

Non. 131, in the year of Alef

Every story that has ever been read, every library that has ever been imagined has found its way into Morealm. With a reluctant assistant from the town, I have transcribed my findings about each library that I have explored. The manuscript is on its way back to my now estranged collaborator. I have faith that my testimony will galvanize him to continue my work and disseminate this discovery to the world. The continuing loss of my flesh and blood to Morealm's universe means my time is drawing to a close soon. This will be my final recording. Soon, very soon, I will cease to exist and become another one of Morealm's spectral figures, forced to roam in the multiplying infinities of its lanes.

I welcome that time.



Domus

As you walk in the direction of Domus, the road diverges into three paths. The one to the left is flanked by trees, the one on the right by stick huts. Without a moment's hesitation, you find yourself walking down the central path – the one that looks familiar. As you continue down the road, you realize you know every little marker on this stretch, every stunted tree and every abandoned construction. Domus appears before you, and you find it contains elements of every home you've ever had – there next to the front porch is the sunrise mural you painted with your father when you were six, and here, lining the pillar are the soft blue string lights that betray the aesthetics of your sixteen-year-old self.

When the librarian – whose name you seem to know – takes your hand and waves you towards the bookshelves, you feel a ray of warmth. You feel it surge in your body as you realize that you know every single person in Domus, every face resembling faces you have met. There are limited bookshelves here, but you walk towards them with a sense of purpose, tingling with knowing anticipation. You slide your fingers along the book titles, and of course, you have read them all before. In your hands now is a ragged old copy of *My Family and Other Animals*, and you are amused at how this copy too has the orange stain on its upper right corner that your four-

year-old sister left there in her despondent search for a canvas.

But can anything prepare you for the fact that when you open the book, you find a tender inscription on its first page, an affectionate little poem that forms an acrostic of your name? And you realize that this is the same book you were gifted by your first love. Next to it is a copy of *The Wasteland*, and now you see your own handwriting winking at you from the margins. And right beside it, the shrivelled, water-soaked copy of *The Little Prince* that you insisted on holding on to even as your mother insisted on giving it to the ragpicker.

Overwhelmed, you turn around and find your old English teacher nodding at you encouragingly. He holds the text you fiercely annotated and dog-eared, the one whose lines you could rattle off in the middle of the night. You smile, ready to re-learn.



The Well of Knowledge at Pyria

Hailed as one of the architectural wonders of the modern world when it was built, the library at Pyria defied the greatest fear that has plagued librarians across time – the hazardous effects of water coming in contact with paper. To access the library you first take a boat to a little island off the coastal town of Zembla and in the middle of the island you begin your seven-hundred-feet descent into a well that now serves as the entrance to the underwater library.

A sign on top of the elevator announces in an optimistic orange: 'You shall emerge a new man' – hiding its portentous possibilities for it is only the brave who dare drink deep in this library. Long rumoured to possess magical qualities the waters of the spring were initially marketed as an energy drink and memory enhancer and it was the accidental discovery during an underwater expedition of large crystalline structures that finally led to the unearthing of the deep well at the bottom of the spring. After numerous experiments the scientists at Pyria finally discovered the properties of the water – it replaced your memory whenever it encountered a more intensely expressed thought. One of the experiments involved assessing the impact of people reading while drinking the water of the Pyrian spring and it was discovered that people no longer thought of dawn except as wine red or economic structures except as spectres.

The library at the bottom of the spring is then a place in which everything you read replaces in perpetuity any prior thought and perception you may have and unless you have experienced an evening walk with a greater intensity every stroll now smells of anaesthesia and every street an argumentative path of insidious intent. The promises of deep learning in Pyria are seductive but be aware there are many who have walked into its portals men and walked out as bugs.



Suskindia

Before arriving at the library in Suskindia you must resist eating too much of the spicy fares that tempt you as you make your way through the crowded bazaar that leads towards the old temple. It is also advisable to carry a handkerchief dabbed with a little rose water, you sniff to protect your sense of smell from the overpowering odour of vegetables, flower, animals, trade and sweat that claims its space in the market air. Once you reach the temple you sense that you are entering a forest, which is strange because there are no trees in the vicinity.

Behind the temple lies a dull brown brick building filled with books which have no titles on their spines. You pick up a book randomly and leafing through it to identify its title and author what strikes you are not the words or the language but the smell. This one smells of burnt rubber and a nauseating memory of a riot you witnessed at seven rushes at you. You keep the book back and move a little further where you detect a slightly familiar fragrance which you struggle to identify. Talcum powder mixes with smoky bourbon as you move between a tropical afternoon in Calcutta and a bitter cold benumbed night in Tangiers, but you stubbornly stay with the smell till it settles on a bunch of fresh coriander drizzled with water. You pick up the book and confidently turn the cover page to reveal a book you read at twelve the summer holiday your leg was

broken, forcing you to limp painfully to open the door, one hand on a crutch, the other earmarking the page only to see the vegetable seller with a basket of greens by his side smiling at you. A little more confident you now make your way through the library guided by your nose as you identify Marquez by the bitter almonds and Kipling by freshly ground pepper. There are new smells too – odours that invite you to open their pages but also to discern between wet wood and dry, poetry and prose, rosewood and cedar, verb and noun. In the library of Suskindia your breath is your bookmark.



Tuqyah

In the library of Tuqyah, they attempt the unlanguageable. You may wander through its halls, sampling muffled screams and oddments of inexpert music, scraps of noise that, grinding against the air, abrade meaning to a fine powder; you may pause before paintings that take mirrors and cities, doubts and obversions to be colours like ochre, vermilion, and bleen; you will be told, should you ask, that on the top floor there are laboratories where savants and choreographers devise experiments to discover what, apart from remaining silent, we can do about the things whereof we cannot speak; and if you persist in questioning, your sceptical air may provoke the response that, yes, there have indeed been many partial and perhaps a few complete successes, the documents recording which are preserved in the stacks on the basement levels to which, alas, the public is forbidden access.

In the library of Tuqyah, they attempt the unlanguageable. And sometimes they lie, for it is a library like any other.



Ratura

It is of the Library at Ratura that the poet and librarian Juarroz wrote: 'I dreamed of a manuscript whose lines were being effaced one by one. I dreamed also of those who wrote it (for I was one), and they too were being effaced one by one. When I awoke there was no one left. There was just one line remaining, which too was being effaced. It said: Only the Book can save us from the Book.'

Because the miracle of making is shadowed at every turn by the coeval miracle of unmaking, and because there is something obscene about the false promise of deathlessness that books seduce their writers with, the Library at Ratura levies a modest but non-negotiable demand: that the reader erase the words of the books she reads as she reads them.

'Only the Book can save us from the Book' – a motto that the bibliomane could adopt just as easily as the biblioclast, his secret sharer, and the motto of the library, which stakes itself upon the hope that, in time, it will be revealed what the Book is from which we need saving, and what the Book will be that saves us. And as it waits for that millennial disclosure, the Library at Ratura pores diligently over its own volumes, waking and dreaming, reading and erasing, making, unmaking.



Arkadia

Having learnt from the elders of his tribe to distrust the arbitrariness of the Euclidean system of measurement of distance and space, Arkady set up his library on a simple principle: that people and things relate to each other not by virtue of their being in time and space but through a proximity or distance that they share with each other through creation. The west, he maintained, had intuited this but misunderstood their own instinct by collapsing the idea of creation into a divine theology manifested in the way that they understood authorship as an extension of creation. His elders had instead termed these relational proximities the songlines which bound people and things to their rightful places. But for libraries as for life, what is right and what is wrong is a matter of shifting boundaries.

For Arkady the singularity of an object's being only made sense in relation to the connections that it forged with the coming into being of another object and once the second object manifested itself in the world, the songlines between them substitute their original identity. The library of Arkadia established an index of songs within a shelf by maintaining the right distance between a work and its proximate or distant other. Shelves similarly maintained a distance between their collective distance and other shelves. Rows followed the same order and it was not surprising to find books which found a place in

more than one shelf by virtue of different relations that they established and whenever this happened it would mean that the entire library would have to be rearranged since proximities and distances were redefined as a result.

In order to deal with the logistical problem this posed and acutely aware of the limitation of his resources, Arkady came up with an elegant solution to the problem. He opened out his library to people who shared his obsession that one could only learn what was right by maintaining things in their rightful places and one only knew what these places were if one knew what was rightful. On certain evenings Arkady can be found strolling through the library, his ivory-tipped walking stick in hand, watching the librarians materialize moral worlds through their songs.



Individual Libraries

Yin Tu – *"Another"*

Tlon – *Monica James*

The Library of Abandoned Children in Burdwan –
Lawrence Liang

The Memorial Library of Chemin-des-Dames –
"Another"

The National Library of Prospero – *Danish Sheikh*
Memorious – Monica James

Jahiliya – *"Another"*

Linearis – *Danish Sheikh*

Spiderlight – *Amy Trautwein*

Logotopia – *Lawrence Liang*

Dermestes Lardarius – *Lawrence Liang*

Origin Myth 1 – *Lawrence Liang*

Library of Abelard – *Danish Sheikh*

Viña del Mar – *"Another"*

Birkertsia – *Lawrence Liang*

Library of Lack – *Danish Sheikh*

Mernarcopiam – *Lawrence Liang*

Neopolis – *Danish Sheikh*
Nakojabad – “Another”
Fanafi lhaq – “Another”
Barataria – *Lawrence Liang*
Googol – *Danish Sheikh*
Daryaganj – *Monica James*
Manifesta – *Lawrence Liang*

Origin Myth 2 – *Monica James*

Asel – *Danish Sheikh*
Orexia – “Another”
Penrhyn – “Another”
The National Library of Cinvar – *Danish Sheikh*
Origins – *Amy Trautwein*
Tactilis – *Monica James*
Mneumonia – *Lawrence Liang*
Number 550, South State Street – *Danish Sheikh*
Desiderate – *Monica James*

Origin Myth 3 – *Danish Sheikh*

Us – *Danish Sheikh*
Potere – *Lawrence Liang*
Copia – *Lawrence Liang*
Unosis – *Monica James*

Machinitum – *Danish Sheikh*
Timaos – “Another”
The Library of the Descendants – “Another”

Origin Myth 4 – *Lawrence Liang*

Puritas – *Lawrence Liang*
Yksityinenkieli – “Another”
Arcanum – *Monica James*
Qaf – “Another”
Libraries of Limits – “Another”
The White Library – *Lawrence Liang*
Scriptoria – *Monica James*
Segula – “Another”

Origin Myth 5 – *Danish Sheikh*

Domus – *Danish Sheikh*
The Well of Knowledge at Pyria – “Another”
Suskindia – *Lawrence Liang*
Tuqyah – “Another”
Ratura – “Another”
Arkadia – *Danish Sheikh*



About the Authors

Lawrence Liang is a lawyer and writer whose idea of paradise is a library.

Monica James is a bibliophile, who also writes and makes films.

Danish Sheikh writes, does theatre, and is occasionally weighed down by the law.

Amy Trautwein prefers plants to books.

Another – a purveyor of fine snake oils